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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the role of matriarchs in African-American culture, explaining that traditionally, African-American matriarchs arise from a combination of African norms and American social positions that naturally forces them to assume leadership conditions. The roles these women assume are a response to the desire to survive in a society that has created and perpetuated a complicated system of social and economical domination for the African-American men with whom they share their lives. They are not exceedingly powerful beings outside of their communities, though they have accomplished great things under the oppressive devices of many. In education, these women are such a strong force because of the history attached to this position. With education being one of the few professions in which African Americans could work, the matriarch was a substantial figure in African-American culture and education. The matriarchs reacted to the social, emotional, educational, and sometimes even financial needs of their students. The matriarchs drew upon matriarchal tradition to help their students get prepared for classes and life in school. They worked toward bridging the gap between school and community, making home visits on a regular basis. They had a nurturing role that helped African-American students and their families in their collective struggle for racial, social, and economic equality. (SM)

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"African American Teaching and the Matriarchal Performance"

from *Sounds and Shades of Blackness:*
Performance Traditions in African American Teaching Before and After Desegregation
an unpublished doctoral dissertation

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The Matriarch

The matriarch is a strong tradition in many cultures, and although familiar traits of the matriarch in general will be exhibited, the archetype as discussed in this work has unique features. The traditions of the African American matriarch have a special relationship to oppression in America, and the dual cultural histories that are a direct result of being an African descendant in America produce this unique characterization.

> Black women's experiences, for example, are influenced by their multiple social roles, which are acted out simultaneously. They do not have the privilege of *only* being women, or of *only* being Black Americans in particular situations. Instead, their roles are melded. Usually they must wear both hats at the same time, (Etter-Lewis, 1991, p. 56).

Traditionally, the African American matriarch arises from a combination of African norms and American social conditions that naturally force these women to assume leadership positions. Often as a normal part of West African culture children came to depend on their mothers because of the common practice of polygamy. This practice of West African men to have several mates, all with whom they lived and created families, carried over into the thinking of African slaves brought to America (Herskovits, 1970). Women were accustomed to having control over their homes as the men in their lives often migrated. They managed the daily operations of family life and enslaved in America, found their tendency toward dominance in familial matters unswayed. Lerone Bennett (1993) notes that "the core of West African society was the family which was organized in some tribes on a matrilineal basis --

descent was traced through the mother" (p. 23). Thus, there was a heavy historical reliance on the African matriarch to keep the family in order. Bennett further contends that "certain slaveholders sanctioned polygamy and polyandry and bred slaves for the market," (p. 104) making slave women valuable property in terms of their contributions to a slaveowner's wealth, increasing the sense of dominance associated with African American women. In addition, the African male's overwhelming sense of powerlessness because the master's word was final over and above any wishes a male slave possessed for his family. He could not protect his wife or family from the many abuses of slavery. This element, in combination with the family customs carried over from Africa, are key factors in the creation and uniqueness of the African American matriarch.

In addition, the roles these women assume are a response to the desire to survive in a society that has created and perpetuated a complicated system of social and economical domination for the African American men with whom many of these women share their lives. Many scholars argue that slavery in and of itself destroyed the black family, altered the African American male self-concept, and created a pattern of matriarchal living for the race (Dorman and Jones, 1974). Thus, the African American matriarch may be more prominent among the distinctive cultures of American society because the African American male is, among American subordinate cultures, leading the ranks of men who are unemployed, incarcerated or deceased. Although there exists a widely held belief that the African American matriarch was the sole force by which her family survived, there is evidence from many sources indicating that when circumstances permitted, African American men were assisting in parenting duties in every sense of the word. In many slavery cases, sale, separation, divorce or demanding work schedules kept one or both parents away from home and has led to the reliance on one parent to maintain the family unit

(Dorman and Jones, 1974). E. Franklin Frazier (1970) reports that the African American slave family enjoyed the status of patriarchal support and stability only in cases where perhaps the son of a favorite house servant might be apprenticed to a trade. However, because of miscegenation laws that stated children would assume the race of their mothers, Frazier further notes that "among the vast majority of slaves, the Negro mother remained the most stable and dependable element during the entire period of slavery (1970, p. 9).

There is a distinct difference in the way the African American matriarch began and evolved. African customs such as polygamy along with social and economic conditions played their role in creating a unique space for the African American matriarch, but there were limitations. Joanne and Elmer Martin remind us that:

> although each wife in a polygamous situation had her own compound or household and although women in their roles as traders in the marketplace often received a portion of what they sold and hence gained some degree of social and economic independence, overall, they were subordinate to men. Therefore, regardless of their importance to the community and their limited independence, they were still bound by the decisions of men (1985, p. 14).

Thus, these matriarches are not to be viewed as exceedingly powerful beings outside of their communities -- the space in which they work and have been allowed to assume some semblance of power. They have, however, in their unique capacities, accomplished great things under the oppressive devices of many.

In education, the African American matriarch is such a strong figure because of the history attached to this position. With education being one of only a few professions in which African Americans could work, the matriarch was a substantial figure in African American culture and education. The archetype represents protection, provides tough-love, and functions as a surrogate mother within the school system. Consistent with its historical beginnings, the matriarch is concerned with maintanence of family, and in relation to education, this duty encompassed a concern for continuity between family and school. And as the name implies, the matriarch is a structural device serving as a support as in a bridge or a doorway.

The pre-desegregation teachers saw a void in the lives of their students. As any good mother who sees a child in need would respond, these educators reacted to the social, emotional, as well as educational needs of the students they served. Patricia Williams saw the African American teachers of her school days as unique beings indeed. I found some of her stories to be unique also:

> They took an interest in the total being. Each morning you had devotion, then you had what we called inspection, which is something you probably never heard of. Everybody lined up along the wall and one person became the inspector. You were priviledged if you became the inspector. You inspected the nails to see if they were clean. You inspected the ears -- any parts that were normally not noticed and you could get away with. You checked for odors, (laughs) and in the winter time, you checked for a handkerchief. You had to have a handkerchief. You know, people didn't have kleenex that much then. But in case you had a cold or had to sneeze, you had to bring a handkerchief with you to school. So, you might have been a girl with a man's handkerchief, but you had to have a handkerchief with you. And you had to pass inspection. Those who were okay could be seated, and those who weren't okay had to stand and you had to say,

> 'Well I forgot my handkerchief this morning.' But if you were not clean, you were given the equipment to clean your nails or you were sent to the bathroom to wash your ears, and (laughs) and the like. It was a total situation. This was expected.

Others remember the kindness shown them by their teachers who they often compared to their mothers, or even used in the place of a mother or father. Virginia Stevens remembers her English teacher in this way:

> When I had problems or had a lot of pressures, things that I didn't feel comfortable even talking [about] with my parents, I could go to her and talk. So I think that helped -- just having teachers who cared. And pushed us to do beyond what we thought we were capable of doing. I think that was a great factor.

It is within this description that it is evident how these teachers drew from more than one archetype as part of their teaching performance. Virginia never stopped in her recollection to separate the matriarchal aspect of this teacher from her trickster stance which pushed the students past their perceived capabilities.

Richard Shaw felt that his socio-economic status placed him in special need of attention and affections from teachers. Reinforcement from teachers against the abuses of American class and race discrimination was an important factor in his academic and personal success:

> Mrs. Jones, she sticks out so vividly in my mind because of the way she treated each student. It was just like she was our mother. You could see that she genuinely cared for us. She always hugged us. And she never put us down, even in our short comings. You were ready to go to school, because you knew Mrs. Jones would be there to fill that

> void if you had any in your life, and with me coming from a poor family with very few resources, a lot of times you felt out of place when you looked at other students -- at how they dressed or money that they had to buy things with at the store in the mornings before school and after school. But, she did not belittle you because of what you did not have.

The matriarchal tradition was a performance upon which teachers drew in helping their students get prepared for classes and life in school. In most cases this performance was assumed by a female teacher; however, in some instances, men also assumed this responsibility. The matriarch, although historically situated in a female role, is again, a structural device used to bridge gaps or support the students in a multitude of unattended needs, and this performance could be and was enacted by men on occassion. Linda Mebane chronicles one such instance with her high school principal:

> He was always that smiling, pleasant kind of person. He treated all the kids alike. He made no difference. He would walk around every day with pockets full of quarters, dimes, and nickles -- pockets bursting full of money. I guess this was that auxiliary funds money, but we didn't know that at the time. He would see children sitting around, and they didn't have what you call free breakfast and lunches then, or reduced lunches. So he would ask, 'Are you hungry, are you hungry?' Many kids wouldn't eat because they didn't want what they had from home, and [the school] had excellent lunches then compared to what we have now. He would say, 'Are you hungry?', and he would reach in his pocket and give the kids money. Everyday he would hand out I'm sure, as much as five or ten dollars or more to kids for lunch, and you know how inexpensive lunches were then.

Others had memories of teachers assuming that mother or parental figure by offering monetary assistance when they knew students were lacking. If the family

didn't have it, the teachers, being some of the best paid members of the African American community, gladly offered their assitance. It was an act of benevolence, and a part of their duty as an educator and an uplifter. It was what one would do for one's own children. Louise Graves had no idea how she was going to attend college because the 10 children in her family kept her parents without money for extravagances like higher education. Here's how a guidance counselor changed her destiny:

> I felt like I was going to college. Didn't know how, didn't know where. And the guidance counselor gave me some tests, and she paid for the tests herself because I couldn't even afford to take the tests. She paid for the tests out of her own money and as a result of the tests, I got a scholarship.

These educators were more than people that these students came in contact with for a few hours during the day. They did not walk away from the school and forget their students existed. Jackie Oakley recalled that:

> When I was in elementary school, even through my high school years, all of my teachers were Black, and those teachers were mothers, fathers, givers, takers, disciplinarians, just a big part of your life, and they molded your life along with your parents.

It is at this point that the educational matriarch's work toward bridging the school and community began. Put all too simply, educators in this day made home visits on a regular basis. It was a required part of the job and an expected duty by the community. When Patricia Williams began talking about the matriarchal educator in conjunction with the use of the preacher tradition, as a person who was interested in the total being, her commentary continued as such:

> The teachers knew every child. They knew every parent. They knew where every child lived. And the child had the fear [that] this teacher might go to my house. It wasn't a matter of calling, because there weren't that many phones, but you behaved because you didn't want them to visit your home. And they did visit -- not just because they wanted to socialize with the parents. And parents looked up to those teachers who came. They thought it was great. Now, prior to integration, I don't care what kind of parent you had, that parent was interested in his kids getting an education. And if he didn't get an education, he was certainly going to behave. He was certainly going to mind the teacher and if he didn't he had problems when he got home.

As a child, Linda Mebane disliked the bond that was formed between the parents and the schools by the educators of segregated days, but now that she is an educator herself, she believes in the power of participatory education and in the strength of solidarity that home visits brought:

> Well, for one thing the teachers would visit your home whether you had a discipline problem or not. And to a certain extent, I think that rubbed off on me. They did that a lot when I was in school. The parents maintained contact, and when you got home you would tell if something went wrong. That's one thing I can say about my parents. I'm not saying that all parents are that way, but [there were] a lot of things that I thought my teacher would do that were totally unfair. I'd be telling Mama at the supper table, while I'd be helping her do the dishes, or prepare dinner, 'Oh, Mrs. Long, she did this.' Mama would never let me know one way or the other whether she thought the teacher was right or wrong. She never said anything. It would make me angry. I would be like, 'Mama, I know I'm right. Why aren't you saying anything.' But she never would say a thing one way or the other.

Louise Graves reiterates Ms. Mebane's and Ms. Williams' sentiments. "When I was in school, my teachers visited the house. It was expected." The strong bond was expected and needed to aid the African American students and their families in their collective struggles for racial, social and economic equality. There was a pressing need to help students learn to survive in a time when life could be overtly threatening for African American people. The matriarch's job was to prepare and protect them from that.

Millie Judson recounted the comical situations she experienced as a young teacher making home visits while working in the segregated schools:

> We used to have to make house visits when I first started teaching. But, you see, we don't do that anymore. We used to have to go to each child's home, and write it up. In the old school, we had to visit each home and sometimes, it helped because the parents would come and talk. And they looked for it. They looked for you. But after we integrated, that was wiped out. But we had to go to each home, and it was always so interesting. If a parent really wasn't ready to see you, then you could hear them just running, and cleaning up. Scrambling . . .(laughs) Or [they would] tell the child to say, 'Tell them I ain't here.' And the child would come to the door and say, 'Mama said she ain't here.' It was always funny. But you would always go back again. [I'd] say, 'Well, tell her I'll be back.' But they thought that was good then, you know. Oh, they loved it, honey. Parents looked forward to it. But now, you see, we don't do that anymore.

A nurturing family is how most felt about the segregated schools, and the matriarch was the one who fostered this atmosphere. Veronica Burnette summarized the situation nicely as she described her days in school:

Mainly what I found in the teachers that I encountered was a more nurturing role. I felt like when I left home, I did not leave mom and dad, because when I got to school I had another mom or dad. And it went that way throughout high school, [it] was basically, like a small community. Everybody knew everybody, and practically everybody knew everybody's parents and family. And anything you would do at school, by the time you got home, you got it again. So, it was a community effort. Everybody jumped in.